

FRANCESCO CLEMENTE

ANIMA NOMADE

23 November 2024 – 30 March 2025
Palazzo Esposizioni Roma
curated by Bartolomeo Pietromarchi

Starting **23 November 2024**, **Palazzo Esposizioni** will be hosting “**Francesco Clemente. ANIMA NOMADE (Nomade Soul)**”, the **largest solo show dedicated to the artist ever staged in Italy** for the importance of the works on display, ranging from his astonishing *Tents* produced between 2012 and 2014 to his series of large wall paintings realized on the museum’s walls especially for the occasion.

The exhibition, promoted by **Assessorato alla Cultura di Roma Capitale** and **Azienda Speciale Palaexpo**, produced and organised by Azienda Speciale Palaexpo and curated by **Bartolomeo Pietromarchi**, has been devised to resemble a large installation that seamlessly unfolds in the exhibition galleries on the first floor of Palazzo Esposizioni, comprising three groups of works: the six *Tents*, the twelve *Flags* and the wall painting cycle entitled *Ocean of Stories*.

The exhibition immerses visitors in the India and Oriental tradition that has always been a source of inspiration for Francesco Clemente, enveloping them in a fabric dense with iconographical references and the private, diary-like sensitivity of his works.

Born in Naples but a nomad by calling, strongly influenced by literature and poetry, Clemente is a fully-fledged poet with a vast vocabulary of symbolic and metaphorical images. His works are declined in an all-embracing aesthetic landscape, at once metaphysical and mystical, cadenced by the representation of self, often entangled with erotic references, always lyrical and emotional and always expressed through an all-encompassing sense of colour.

His tents, inspired by Upanishad and Buddhist philosophy, embody the spirit of a wandering existence and represent “shelters for nomads”. Clemente describes them as “the result of many disparate threads that have become interwoven in my mind over the years” – the symbol of a wanderer’s life chosen to escape a single, linear vision of history and to embrace a global geography. The tents, with their walls painted with luminous tempera colours, conjure up imaginary worlds and echo sacred sites such as the Mogao Caves, or Thousand Buddha Grottoes, in Dunhuang, China, or the Ajanta and Ellora Caves in India, spaces for meditation that have made a deep mark on the artist’s cultural memory. Each tent – from the *Angels’s Tent* to the *Pepper Tent* – is an interior world rich in symbols, memories and reflections stratified over time.

The twelve *Flags* facing each other, suspended aloft to form a corridor to be passed through, are painted on both sides: on one side they bear symbolic yet recognisable figures, on the other, enigmatic aphorisms embroidered in gold. Both sides appear to be individual works, polarities of paint and lettering yet which merge with one another in their separation, like light and shade.

And finally, the wall painting cycle entitled *An Ocean of Stories*, produced on site for the occasion, ideally opens and closes the exhibition, bringing together all the experiences in a slender, unbroken line that suggests an ongoing, circular narrative. Thus Clemente recreates an imaginary

journey in which each element, from colour to line, reflects the essence of a wandering soul in endless movement.

EXHIBITION PATHWAY

STANDING WITH TRUTH TENT

The *Standing With Truth Tent* intertwines heterogeneous images, merging intuitive perceptions of daily life with mythological references and deep-seated visual memories. Nets, webs, honeycomb-shaped hearts, suspended spiders, embracing couples, lizards and moths are just some of the most evocative motifs in the artist's rich, symbolic vocabulary. The tent's name is inspired by an aphorism from 15th-century Indian mystic Kabir, who described the body as a vehicle for connection with the absolute: "I sit with truth, I rise with truth, I lie down with truth." According to this principle, the body is conceived as a tangible presence. Rather than a metaphor, it is a reality to be taken literally: bodily experience transcends material limits to approach a dimension of profound and transformative truth. The body is thus transformed from a merely physical, conditioned entity into an echo of forgotten desires, reflecting all unconscious aspirations in which we "spiritualize matter and materialize spirit".

Clemente views truth as inherently unstable and mutable. It is never fixed, always in transformation, and always elusive. This idea permeates his work, weaving together everyday perceptions and mythological memories to form a symbolic and intuitive language emergent in its purest form.

Standing with Truth Tent, 2013-2014

Tempera on cotton, embroidery, hand stitching, bamboo poles, wood finials, ropes, iron weights, 600 x 400 x 300 cm

Collection of the artist

PEPPER TENT

The *Pepper Tent* is inspired by the Kerala region and the idea of travel. Long known for pepper production, this coastal state in southern India has historically served as a commercial crossroads, long ago forging maritime links with ancient civilizations. The painted interior evokes the deep green and blue of tropical lands, steeped in historical memory and hidden marine archaeology. A tapestry-like, grey-blue wave motif is dotted with splashes of colour representing the land and lush vegetation; pepper plants intertwine throughout the landscape.

Vibrant images fill the tent: a large, open palm holding peppercorns, vine-entwined couples, boats laden with frangipani floating on an ocean, and a shipwreck resting in a female figure's lap. These sensual and mysterious details evoke the ancient legend of the now-submerged port of Muziris. The exterior walls are adorned with pink, ochre, light blue and white waves, along with open palms embroidered in grey. Symbols of a floating eye, a pierced heart and falling peppercorns decorate each palm. The final theme to emerge is a shipwreck metaphor: having lost all certainties about the journey, all that remains is to rest on the shore, contemplating the wreckage of one's own securities.

Pepper Tent, 2013-2014

Tempera on cotton, embroidery, hand stitching, bamboo poles, wood finials, ropes, iron weights, 600 x 400 x 300 cm

Collection of the artist

DEVIL'S TENT

Combining medieval and contemporary symbols, the *Devil's Tent* explores the themes of power and corruption through the imagery of diabolical figures. Medieval manuscript-inspired demon masks frame the exterior; inside the tent, the artist depicts louche-looking dandies and pimps,

elegantly attired in tuxedos, top hats, monocles, and cigars. These figures bring to mind Eshu, an Afro-Brazilian deity of Yoruba origin, portrayed as a sinister gentleman roaming Mangureira, the former slave market in Rio de Janeiro. Rich in the symbolism of sexuality and power, these depictions portray a distorted reality: a dandy engages with an ithyphallic man, while a naked woman caresses the globe-shaped belly of another man, symbol of desire for domination. An elegant gentleman leads a naked couple on all fours, pulling them by a chain around their necks; smoke rises from his cigarette, outlining Africa and symbolizing the colonial legacy. In one corner, a woodland figure covered in branches and twigs is tethered by an ankle to the “devil” in a top hat, symbol of deceit and power. The “devil” in these images embodies the archetype of the unconscious and, reminiscent of the tarot figure, holds an inverted torch. In this tent, the artist suggests that, rather than rational will and the illusion of power it creates, subterranean forces often beyond our knowledge are the true drivers of our lives. The work encourages us to acknowledge that our sense of control is illusory; that embracing these unconscious forces can lead to a new awareness, reconnecting us to our most authentic and natural essence. As the artist states, it is “the force that, by inverting the sense of light, illuminates the darkness of our most hidden and clandestine desires, the ones that imprison us until we get to know them”.

Devil's Tent, 2013-2014

Tempera on cotton, embroidery, hand stitching, bamboo poles, wood finials, ropes, iron weights,
600 x 400 x 300 cm
Collection of the artist

TAKING REFUGE TENT

Inside the *Taking Refuge Tent*, almost monochromatic figures dominate an atmosphere of calm and sacrality. Large therianthropic figures – beings with the heads of fierce animals and the bodies of a saintly being – sit in meditative lotus position, cradling meek animals in their laps as if to protect them, clad in white as a sign of faith and renunciation. The scene illustrates harmony between predator and prey, as well as finding mutual refuge in the Buddha. Far from an idealistic vision of peace and an apparent reconciliation of opposites, the artist suggests a latent tension, a possible sense of apprehension and alienation within the tent’s dark space. The outside of the tent is emblazoned with fragments of a seminal Buddhist text, beginning with a declaration of refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha, the White Tara (and the White Tara mandala). In other words, refuge may be found in spiritual guidance, community, law, and the goddess of compassion. The artist questions how, while acknowledging the comfort of believing in such refuge, we may reconcile our compassionate nature with the ferocity of predators, wolves, and wild beasts. The theme in the *Taking Refuge Tent* echoes Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film *The Hawks and the Sparrows*, in which Saint Francis converts hawks and sparrows to the love of God until one converted hawk kills a sparrow, because such is the nature of the hawks and the plight of the sparrows.

Taking Refuge Tent, 2012-2013

Tempera on cotton, embroidery, hand stitching, bamboo poles, wood finials, ropes, iron weights,
600 x 400 x 300 cm
Courtesy Dib Bangkok

FLAGS - THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

Twelve triangular flags hang individually on poles, facing one another as they jut out from the wall at regular intervals. The aerial corridor they create invites viewers to look upwards as they traverse the white room. The artist conceived and worked with local artisans in India to craft the flags, skilfully weaving tradition and innovation together.

Each flag features a painting on both sides, akin to opposite sides of a coin. One side displays images and faces, the other gold-embroidered aphorisms from Guy Debord’s famous book, *The*

Society of the Spectacle. Translated here into a poetic, visual duality, the aphorisms comment the separation between art and life, reality and representation, and late capitalism's drift towards the ephemeral and superficial. Each side is an autonomous work, opposite poles of painting and writing intertwined in inseparable dialogue akin to the meeting of light and shadow. The installation celebrates signs as living matter, elevated here as a yardstick for the world. Invited to explore the delicate imaginary thread linking the two sides, visitors experience a unified, complex and elusive work.

Flags – The Society of the Spectacle, 2014

Collage, tie dye, embroidery, paint on fabric, bamboo

Variable dimensions

Collection of the artist

MUSEUM TENT

In the *Museum Tent*, Clemente delves into one of his recurring themes: the self-portrait. Painted on coloured walls under a black-and-white ceiling, these portraits feature images depicting cobras, turtles, hands and mandalas from the artist's drawings, hand-printed in traditional block printing technique and arranged in a museum-like order. Challenging the static nature of portraiture, on the side panels Clemente paints himself in sumptuous and baroque frames from the classical tradition. Unconfined by the frame's borders, evading any temptation to rigidly define himself, we see him confronting a tiger, catching a fish outside the frame, anointing himself with smoke, and dangling with his tongue sticking out.

Salman Rushdie remarked that Clemente's self-portraits explore an identity under constant transformation. The artist moves between different worlds and temporarily absorbs different identities. Revealing multiple visions of self, these performative, chameleonic self-portraits challenge the notion of the self-portrait as a fixed or singular image. Symbolizing museal crystallization, painted images of museums Clemente cherishes – including the Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth, the Mauritshuis in The Hague and MADRE in Naples – adorn the tent's exterior walls.

Museum Tent, 2013-2014

Tempera on cotton, embroidery, hand stitching, bamboo poles, wood finials, ropes, iron weights, 600 x 400 x 300 cm

Collection of the artist

ANGELS' TENT

The *Angels' Tent* beckons us into a tranquil and poetic setting where the artist's imagination brings celestial figures to life. Angels are a motif that frequently appears in Clemente's work, emerging out of personal memories and iconographic visions, and presented in vivid and surprising forms. Paintings of angels male and female decorate the tent's inner walls and ceiling, depicted in relaxed and almost earthly poses. Some angels have part of their wings clipped; others seem to hover mid-air, beneath celestial parasols and luminous rainbows. Affected by desire and suffering, their bodies hint at a descent into human temptation and emotion. A faintly traced serpent beneath each angel alludes to John Milton's serpentine Satan in *Paradise Lost*. The figures and images evoke cultural and literary references ranging from the art of William Blake and Johann Heinrich Füssli to Persian miniatures, tarot cards and traditional Indian postcards. Another reference is Walter Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*, observing the ruins of history without turning to the light, caught between awe and horror, evoking a vision of angelic weariness and decay, and an image of celestial detachment and melancholia. The artist conceived the design for the tent's exterior in blue, brown and beige camouflage fabric, resulting in a deceptive, shape-shifting effect. This is enlivened by a "chimeric" network of motifs hand-printed in black and white using the traditional

block printing technique, along with hearts, clubs, and spades that blend and transform into sensual tangles of forests populated by birds, skeletons and couples.

Twelve coloured images of archangels appear on the outer walls, set in keyhole-shaped slots to suggest that, even if a guardian angel allows us to take a peek inside, paradise is still inaccessible.

Angels' Tent, 2013-2014

Tempera on cotton, embroidery, hand stitching, bamboo poles, wood finials, ropes, iron weights, 600 x 400 x 300 cm

Collection of the artist

WALL PAINTINGS – OCEAN OF STORIES

Painted onto the museum's walls for the exhibition, these wall paintings form part of the artist's *Ocean of Stories* series. He initially created the series in Beijing to evoke the idea of water, a central element in Chinese culture, sometimes present in symbolic or "petrified" form. The work's deep "ox-blood" red colour (known in America as "Indian Red") conjures a connection to the land and historical memory, recalling traditional American, red-painted barns and the tragic history of the indigenous peoples who were deported and exterminated in Oklahoma.

The wall painting's execution adheres to a strict protocol: artists draw an outline in sanguine that leaves no scope for errors or "pentimenti". The outline is then filled in with waves of ox-blood red, the motif never touching the perimeter. This collective effort brings this work to life, many hands gradually shading the colour from lighter to darker hues.

Monumental yet ephemeral pieces, their fate is to be erased at the end the exhibition. Part of a cycle of creation and dissolution, they reflect the fleeting nature of memory and the transitory essence of art.

Wall Paintings - Ocean of Stories, 2024

Sanguine and tempera on wall

BIOGRAPHY

FRANCESCO CLEMENTE

Having crossed geographies, cultures and different modes of expression, Francesco Clemente embodies the figure of the wandering artist par excellence.

In the course of his career he has used oil painting, fresco, encaustic painting, pastel and watercolour, and devoted time and energy to sculpture. In the 1970s Clemente fostered the return to painting as a significant means of expression.

The artist, who has found inspiration in oriental philosophical, spiritual and aesthetic tradition, depicts in his works a fragmentary ego and figures constantly changing amid different worlds, the material and the spiritual, the male and the female, that aspire to forms of reconciliation.

Before establishing his studio in New York in 1980, Clemente lived in India, devoting his energy to the study of Sanskrit and Hindu and Buddhist literature in the library of the Theosophical Society in the city of Chennai.

In New York he has worked with poets such as Ginsberg and Robert Creeley, and with artists of the caliber of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol. In conjunction with Raymond Foye, he established a publishing company named Hanuman Books and has also become a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

His work is on display in many prestigious museums throughout the world, including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Tate Gallery in London, the Kunstmuseum in Basel, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museums in Bilbao and New York, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Clemente lives and works between New York and India.

Press material can be downloaded at the following link:

<https://www.palazzoesposizioneiroma.it/pagina/francesco-clemente-anima-nomade-stampa>

INFORMATION

Palazzo Esposizioni Roma

Roma, via Nazionale, 194

www.palazzoesposizioneiroma.it

Facebook: @PalazzoEsposizioni | Instagram: @palazzoesposizionei | Twitter: @Esposizioni

TITLE

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Francesco Clemente

CURATED BY

Bartolomeo Pietromarchi

RUNS FROM

23 November 2024 to 30 March 2025

PROMOTED BY

Assessorato alla Cultura di Roma Capitale and Azienda Speciale Palaexpo

PRODUCED AND ORGANISED BY

Azienda Speciale Palaexpo

CATALOGUE

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Krumiri

OPENING TIMES

Tuesday to Sunday from 10.00 am to 8.00 pm, closed Monday.

Last tickets sold one hour before closing time.

ADMISSION

Full price € 12.50 - concessions € 10.00 – children and teens aged 7 to 18 € 6.00

Admission free for children aged 6 and under.

The ticket is valid for all the exhibitions currently on.

FIRST WEDNESDAY OF THE MONTH Admission free for visitors aged under 30 (from 2.00 pm to closing time).

ACCESSIBILITY

Palazzo Esposizioni Roma is accessible to visitors with reduced mobility or sensory impairment via three entrances with no architectural barriers.

PRESS OFFICE

AZIENDA SPECIALE PALAEXPO

Piergiorgio Paris | M. +39 347 8005911 - p.paris@palaexpo.it

Federica Mariani | M. +39 366 6493235 - f.mariani@palaexpo.it

Adele Della Sala | M. +39 366 4435942 - a.dellasala@palaexpo.it

Secreteria: Dario Santarsiero | T. +39 06 69627 1205 - d.santarsiero@palaexpo.it;

ufficio.stampa@palaexpo.it